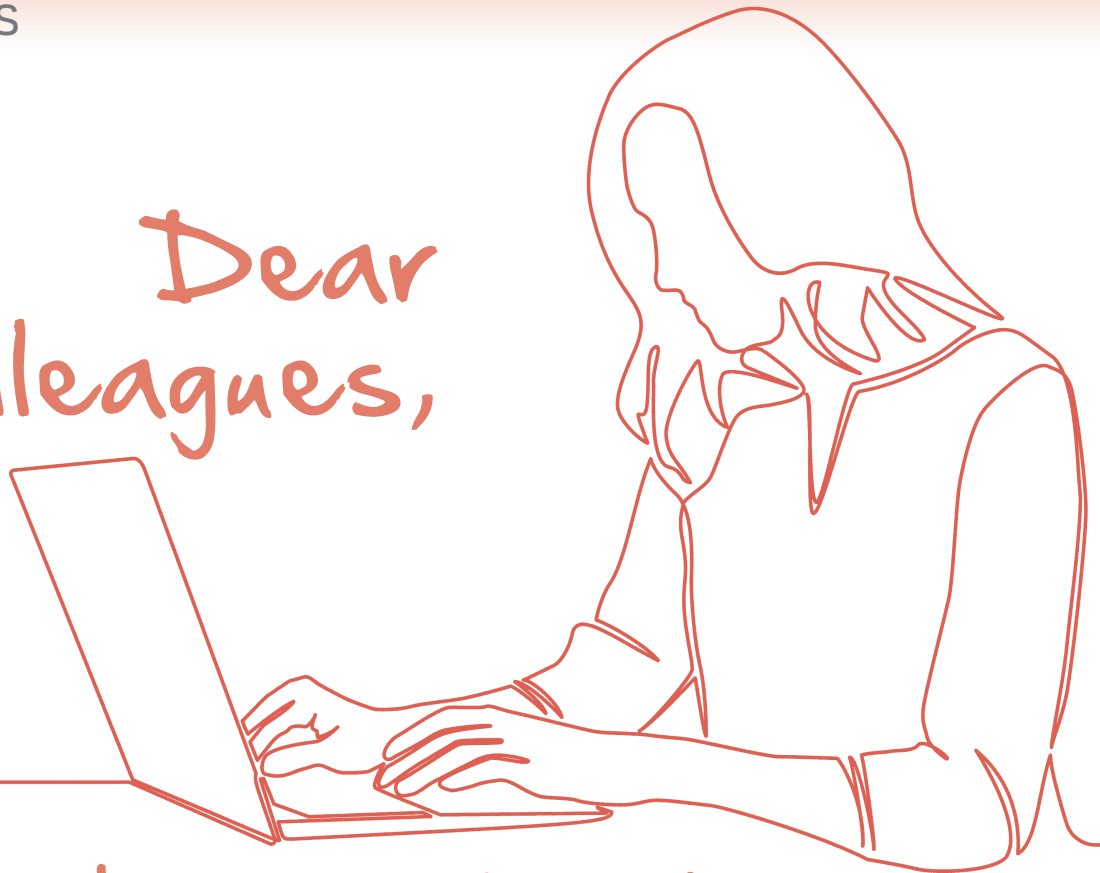


Dear
Colleagues,



My Journey of Acceptance and Perseverance

Elisha Mulji penned this letter for publication in her workplace newsletter for co-workers to better understand her and her disability. Mulji is the Senior Project Manager on the Solution Delivery team at Telus in Burnaby, B.C.

I woke up one morning taking a moment, like I usually do, to stretch and give gratitude for the life I breathe and to plan my next moves to get ready for the day. But, as I went to stand up, I stumbled. I looked down and had to compute that something about me was different.

As anxiety filled me, I found myself reliving that moment a few years ago when my leg was amputated quite suddenly. This was just another morning that I had forgotten about that.

On an August morning in 2019 I woke up and within an hour I was headed into surgery to have my leg amputated due to a blood clot. No time to process. No time to grieve. No time to understand that my life would drastically change that day.

Yet, leaving the hospital after recovery and rehab, I was excited to persevere through healing, and the idea of a prosthetic knee was exciting. Watching videos of ampu-

tees hiking, riding motorcycles, travelling and swimming inspired me to want to do the same. It looked effortless.

I had so many dreams, so many adventures that I wanted to experience... travelling to far-off lands, swimming in the ocean, feeling the wind in my hair as I road-tripped to new destinations, and so much more. I was going to do this and nothing was going to stop me. Here comes Bionic Wonder Woman!

About five months later, I took my first steps on a prosthetic knee, and it was very exciting. But progress was hindered by the pandemic. There were significant delays in starting physiotherapy to learn how

to walk again. As we tried different knees, I felt like I was never quite getting to the place of feeling safe to walk, and all of the new information that I was trying to process became quite overwhelming.

I stopped wearing my leg unless I had to go out. I would have great physio sessions, but the second I got home I wanted to tear off my leg and hide under the covers. I wanted to eat everything in sight and sit in the dark. I felt paralyzed.

Thoughts crowded my mind. I wasn't moving forward fast enough; I wasn't going to live up to people's expectations. They didn't understand how hard this was. They were going to see me differently. The world around me already did. I couldn't do the things I had done before. What if I couldn't do it? What if I failed? What if I hurt myself? Had I done something wrong to lose my leg? Did I deserve a second chance? I was ashamed... I could not embrace the unknown. It was daunting and all I could feel was fear.

I realized that I had never mourned the loss of my leg or allowed myself to feel my emotions. I hadn't accepted that things were different, that I was different. How could I accept and persevere when I was still lost somewhere in the middle?

I started to see a counsellor and allowed myself to be vulnerable with my loved ones, which helped me to realize that I had to feel my emotions. Let's just say that there were a lot of tears. But I felt lighter. I learned how trauma affects our body and mind – it alters our sense of being, emotional responses, the way we communicate with ourselves, and the perception of the world around us. Trauma requires healing, facing your fears and emotions while being kind to yourself. As much as a prosthesis felt unnatural, so did all of those thoughts. I realized that I'd have to work on this one from within.

And so began my journey of reconnecting with myself – my "new self". Daily meditation really helped me find a place of calm. Throat Chakra singing lessons also helped me to heal through vibration and challenging fear, allowing me to move from the shadows into a place where I was embracing myself. As a side benefit, I could also now stand the sound of my own voice.

I realized that I needed a multifaceted approach to my recovery. I started seeing a new physio-

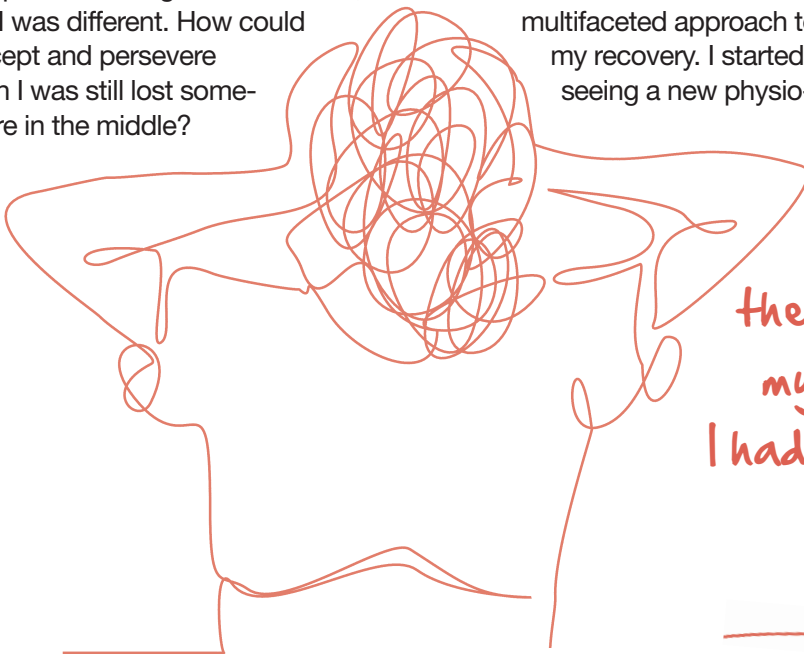
therapist, and not only did she help me to gain strength and refine my walking but she was a counsellor as I moved through this journey. She asked me about my dreams: I wanted to be a two-legged person and walk again without aids. I wanted to travel, swim, and drive... things that made me happy and that I had previously taken for granted. We started off with strength training exercises.

It was hard at first. I hadn't worked out in a long time and now I had to do this every day? This also meant I had to wear my prosthesis. One thing that my amputation forced me to do is to be present. If I wasn't in the moment, I wouldn't

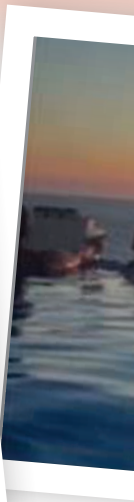
learn what my new way of doing things was. I wouldn't understand what my body could do.

I graduated to riding a bike and walking a treadmill in the gym. The small wins felt like the biggest wins, and I was beginning to realize that I could do a lot of things – just differently. Movement is medicine. Trust in what your body can do.

With the momentum that I was gaining in my overall recovery, my crowded thoughts began to dissipate, and I found myself in a place that was more positive and open to possibilities, like travel.



"I had never mourned the loss of my leg or allowed myself to feel my emotions. I hadn't accepted that things were different, that I was different."



Travel has always been a passion of mine. It usually consisted of me going with the flow, backpacking on my own, exploring jungles and meeting new people. I love strolling through an airport with the promise of a new adventure ahead. My friends asked me to go on a trip to Mexico. I was riddled with fear. How was I going to get through the airport? I can't walk that far. What if my leg starts having problems? What if my water leg doesn't work? What if I inconvenienced my friends?

Working with my physiotherapist, we prepared for this trip by talking through each thing, simulating, imagining, and doing.

Swimming was one of my biggest passions and now one of my biggest fears. How was I going to get in and out of the pool, and what if my water leg fell off and I couldn't get it back on? I had already had this experience on the beach, and it turned into a 45-minute ordeal. How could I conquer this fear?

As I played in the water, I realized that a lot of my fears were caused by overthinking. I still had intuition about how to do these things, so I adapted accordingly.

I was able to climb the ladder to get out of the water, and even developed an aqua fitness routine. Most of our time in Mexico was spent in the pool and my friends were nothing but supportive.

I always felt like I had to be further along in my walking journey to deserve to drive again. I even thought that maybe I wasn't capable of it. After years of using a wait-list as a convenient excuse for not pulling the trigger, I contacted another driver rehab program.

After doctors' notes, having to take a signs and signals test, and getting a modified license, the day-two evaluation was upon me. The first day was a combination of vision and mental testing, and day two was using a left pedal accelerator modification while

driving a car. It felt a little odd having to do mental testing when my leg was the reason I was there. I had to let go of my ego and do what I had to do to get my license back. I passed. I was back in the driver's seat for the first time in four years.

It brought back memories of getting lost in random neighbourhoods, weeknight drives to the beach, and road trips. I was a little heavy on the accelerator at first (some things don't change) but the motor skills came back quite easily. Car shopping has now commenced, and I have even assisted another amputee in preparing for the process.

I'm going to continue to dream. It's what motivates me to challenge myself every day.

"I realized that a lot of my fears were caused by overthinking. I still had intuition about how to do these things, so I adapted."



"I learned to rest from being independent all the time. I learned to trust in myself and my community and to be vulnerable."



My new goals include riding a bike, backpacking through the jungles of far-off lands, and road-tripping with the promise of another ocean to jump into.

Through this journey I learned to reclaim my power. I am not a victim of fear. My amputation does not define me. I get to decide who I am and what I am capable of. I don't need to compare myself to others; I need to challenge myself to defy comfort zones and be proud of the littlest wins. I can also be gentle with myself when I recognize that I'm having a bad day – this is not a race.

I learned to rest from being independent all the time. I learned to trust in myself and my community and to be vulnerable.

I am immensely grateful for all

of my teachers for their unwavering support. In turn, I am committed to assist others who will face similar challenges. No matter what we're going through, we can all relate to emotions and help each other work through them.

Parting thoughts... we have all been through trials and tribulations. Just because mine is visible does not mean that it's more important than yours. So, I ask you now, how will you challenge yourself to persevere? How could you be more supportive to a colleague who is going through something tough, be it a visible change in their body or health, or perhaps something emotional or internal? How will you teach the next generation to do so as well?



Thanks for being part of my journey!